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John Gallaher is the author of *The Little Book of Guesses* (2007, Four Way Books), winner of the Levis Poetry prize; *Map of the Folded World* (2009, University of Akron); co-author, with G.C. Waldrep, of *Your Father on the Train of Ghosts* (2011, BOA Editions), as well as co-editor of *Time Is a Toy: The Selected Poems of Michael Benedikt* (2014, University of Akron Press). His poetry appears widely in such places as *The Boston Review*, *Crazyhorse, Field*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, and *Pleiades*, and in anthologies including *The Best American Poetry*. Gallaher is currently associate professor of English at Northwest Missouri State University, and co-editor of *The Laurel Review* and The Akron Series in Poetics.

I had the good fortune of interviewing John Gallaher between two of his readings—one in Rochester, New York, where he read alongside Nickole Brown at Dine and Rhyme, a fundraising event for his publisher BOA Editions, and the other at SUNY Geneseo. During his reading of "XV" from *In A Landscape*, a poem about his cousin Lyle surviving a freak crash of the cargo plane he was co-piloting, Gallaher paused for a moment to comment that he couldn't shake the idea that the students in the first row of seats looked like they were in an airplane cockpit. Gallaher weaves comments and anecdotes like these into his readings so often and so well that they become part of the poem. Some poets might take offense at being called a great storyteller, but I doubt Gallaher would. Gallaher told me he's delighted by reviews of *In a Landscape* that call authorship into question. Wayne Coyne, lead singer of the

Flaming Lips, for instance, writes, "Gallaher is not a writer or a poet, he is a psychic using words to trick us."

ROBERT HELD: How does the conversational tone figure into your work?

JOHN GALLAHER: John Ashbery, when he wrote a blurb for one of my books, said "In some ways it seems like John Gallaher's poems write themselves." You could look at that as a negative, as if I'm not even an author at all. But that's part of the John Cage idea: the context creates the art. If we really believe this stuff we say all the time about "if this author wasn't there to write this work someone else would have because the age needed it," let's add to that "Okay, I don't exist. Okay, you talk." In *Triggering Town,* Richard Hugo talks about how poets have obsessive language, words that obviously mean more to the poet than to everyone else. In some ways, that sounds too mystical to me. I want words to be kind of conversational words, but at the same time, I think maybe for me it's conjunctions that mean more to me than they do to most people. *Maybe, perhaps, kind of, or*… I love that language, because it's not the language of finality; it's the language of continuance and that means we have hope.

RH: Could you talk about your fascination with John Cage?

JG: My fascination with Cage started back in the 80s when I was an undergraduate. Right after Cage died, there was a documentary that someone made about him, and it was showing in a classroom. I wasn't enrolled in the class or anything, but I walked by and saw this thing going on, and it looked so odd…It was these two guys playing chess with John Cage's lilting voice talking about something or other. I went in and started watching it and was fascinated. At that time, I read *Silence* and I liked it and thought it was really neat. Later, in about 2009, I had a little bit of research money from my university to buy some books, so I replaced my copy of *Silence* which was long missing, and bought another one of his books, *A Year from Monday*. I also bought a CD, titled *In a Landscape,* of some of his earlier compositions. I sat down to write one day, and I was very not interested in writing as I had been writing. I was listening to *In a Landscape,* so I put that at the top of the page and started typing, and I typed for three months.

When people think John Cage, they think of "4'33," some of his most avant garde compositions, but John Cage also made a lot of really melodic compositions. In his writing, too, some of it is very discordant, but interspersed are these anecdotes, just straightforward anecdotes—things that someone told him or that he knows from his own life, and I really like that aspect of the writing. Cage shows us that you can talk—you can just talk—and at the same time you can be having this theoretical conversation. This understanding allowed me to do the same kind of thing in my new work.

RH: You mentioned in your reading that the motive behind the new direction in *In a Landscape* was that you were tired of imagination and art.

JG: I'd been doing collaborative writing with my friend G.C. Waldrep, and when you're doing that, you're in this communal space, which is a big act of imagination. When we were finished with our collaborative work, we retreated into our own personal spaces, and for me, that meant a kind of denial of imagination. Of course, that's all B.S., but this thinking worked to trick myself out of the imagination that I was very happy with and that I'd grown accustomed to. I call it the "John Ashbery imagination," and because I loved that so much, I wanted to walk away from it, and say "I'm not going to make anything up. I'm not going to imagine something; I'm only going to recall… I'm not even going to try for music. I'm going to try for prose."

RH: Speaking of Ashbery, you're often compared to him. How would you explain your relation to his work?

JG: So many of us are so indebted to the barriers Ashbery broke down, to the territory he opened up. He inscribed that territory, so anyone who follows in that path will have Ashbery elements. At the same time, you can't wear someone else's clothes. So, how do you go into someone else's territory and build your own house? How do you have your own psychological entity, but still inhabit that world? I was thinking, what are those of us who are writing in this vein denying, or what are they walking away from, and are we walking away from things that we don't need to walk away from? In the 90s, I was reacting very strongly to a kind of 80s poetry that was pretty serious, kind of elegiac, had to do with parents and children. I walked away from that tone, but also that content. Now that we're in an Ashbery landscape, what about that content? Can we bring some of that material back into our world that we're making here?

RH: One thing I admire about both your work and Ashbery's is the use of names. How do names function in your poems?

JG: There is one person who has been named in every single book I've written—I don't think I've missed any—Margot. But I don't know any Margots; I just like that name. Naming is also a New York School thing, but in New York School poetry it was real, well-known people, but when I name someone in a poem, it's going to be someone like me that no one really gives a shit about. If you're John Ashbery and you name Frank O'Hara in your poems you say "Well, it's Frank O'Hara; this is important!" We can deal with made up names because there's a power in those names, and I like that, but then with *In a Landscape*, I said forget that, I'm going to say Brendan; I'm going to say Natalie, and they have to deal with that, and I have to deal with that.

RH: How do you navigate the nonfiction aspect of your poetry?

JG: We have to respond in some way to veracity. You have to make these constant negotiations of "oh, I can't tell that. I can tell this story but not this one little part of it." One of the things I've decided is that anything said to me is open game. When I'm talking about someone in my poetry, I'm often writing about something they've told me, and I feel like that's fair: they gave it to me. But if I pass by a window, and I see you doing something in a room, that feels like invasion. Unless it's something really public, like my wife has some brothers who have had trouble with the law and are in jail. That happened, so I can write that. It might be uncomfortable for the family or them, but it happened. I have to say, though, my father doesn't read anything I write. What if he did? He might not like some of it, but some, I'm sure he'd be okay with. I'm not mean. I'm not vindictive.

RH: How did you grow up? What is your life like now?

JG: I live in Missouri in a small town of 11,000 and have a couple kids. We ride bicycles, and I'm a youth soccer coach. As a kid, I moved around a lot. I was adopted. We don't talk much about adoption as adults, what adoption does, not in a tragic way, just the regular way anyone who has been adopted goes through a certain psychological veil that people often deny, even the adopted child who doesn't want to upset the applecart. You were brought into this space, this new family, and if you complain about it maybe you'll be sent away. I was three-and-a-half when I was adopted, and I felt a little like I was performing. They say who you become is 50% nature and 50% nurture. I'm missing context about who I am. I think, at the same time, that this applies to everyone, to every child and every family: I came from space and showed up here suddenly, and I'm bringing some of my space with me. We all think, "These people are crazy. I'm not crazy, am I? Am I one of these people? Oh my god, I belong here."

My life now is an interesting one because it's a cornfield basically. A lot of people want to sentimentalize this setting or push it into the past. Talking about someone whose house abuts a cornfield, it's either going to become a horror movie—children will walk out of the cornfield—or it's either going to be this sepia tone, Americana thing, but what if it turns out there's just a normal life there, you know? I get the same TV channels as everyone else

RH: With *In a Landscape* are you trying to open up that story?

JG: I think so. I was nearing fifty at the time I began the book, and my children were young, and other people, other men especially around the age of fifty, were dying of heart attacks around me, these middle-aged dads dying. It became this sort of "here are my stories, kids, in case I'm not here to tell them." Being conversational was important to me, and not lying was really

important to me, not making things up, but also really trying to say what I think about things, because that's part of our story—try it! There's not really a writing prompt for this. I was thinking about that today, because I was thinking about visiting a class and having a writing prompt for them, but the writing prompt I really want to give is this: tell me what you really think about asbestos, and use some object to explore this, like what was your last experience with a teacup? What happened? And then, of course, do you love your parents?

RH: Do you have any advice for undergraduate creative writers?

JG: It was easier in my age, because no one expected anything from you. I didn't expect anything from me. All the literary journals were hard to get into, and all the people getting into them were thirty and up, even for the first time. So when I was twenty-four or twenty-two or twenty, I really felt like there was time, but now it seems like there's so much pressure on everyone. Even when you're still in school, you're supposed to already have all these books and accomplishments behind you. I say, take your time, do your thing. I was thirty-six when my first book came out, and now no one asks me how old I was when it came out—I could have been twenty-six for all anyone cares now; it doesn't matter. It only matters when you're in the midst of it. Most of us don't get to be the big innovators. Most of us just get to inscribe our little part of the territory. But for the people who do make the big innovations, like Ashbery, most of the innovation is done early in their career, but the best work come later.